

# The Emerging Situation in Afghanistan

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ROHIT SINGH

## Introduction

After a decade long conflict that has left 2052 Coalition troops dead and more than 12,000 injured (till 30 June 2011; Brookings Afghanistan Index) the beginning of the end has been sounded by US President Obama with the first of the US troops withdrawing from Afghanistan. The draw down will be completed in 2014. There are reports, however, that the US will not completely exit and will seek bases in Afghanistan to maintain a partial presence. Be that as it may, either eventuality will mean an Afghanistan devoid of US military presence or a diminished one. Ominously, for India, absent a military footprint of its own, the shrinking US security umbrella has grave implications for protecting its economic interest in Afghanistan and its national security concerns in J&K and other parts of India.

## Present Situation

Consequent to the US surge which brought the coalition troop strength to 1,30,000, the past one year or so saw a relentless sweep by ISAF troops across the length and breadth of Afghanistan, including in Taliban strongholds of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. For the first time, ISAF troops resolutely addressed Marjah, Helmand, Musa Qala and Kandahar. This was accompanied by relentless drone strikes against militant strongholds in FATA, including first in South Waziristan and now in North Waziristan. The combined ground and aerial assaults considerably dismantled the senior and middle level leadership of Al

Qaeda, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the elimination of Osama Bin Laden in a Special Forces operation.

Tremendous attrition was also caused on Afghan Taliban, Haqqani network (HQN), Tehril-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other anti-US forces. Debilitated though the Taliban leadership became, its forces have been resurgent, particularly in the past six months or so by taking the battle into the US camp, notching up a significant success by bringing down a Chinook helicopter carrying 30 US Servicemen including Navy Seals in a RPG strike. In the event that this modified RPG strike is replicated, the US may well reach its 'Stinger' moment, just as the USSR had done two decades earlier, stopping them in their Afghan tracks. In short, to recount an aphorism, the Taliban is winning by not losing and the Americans are losing by not winning.

The ground situation is telling on the national will of the American people who are irrevocably losing their appetite for this war. Its present economic woes mean that the US is unlikely to pursue counter insurgency strategy, and will increasingly resort to counter terrorism operations even if it continues to retain some presence after 2014 and in the period up to that benchmark year.

At the regional geo-political level, Afghanistan remains a major axis of India-Pakistan strategic competition in the backdrop of US inability to reverse the Taliban's battle field momentum or creating conditions for adequate governance and security structures that may fragment immediately upon US departure or significant reduction. Pakistan is likely to assist the Taliban or any other favourably aligned group in its attempts to takeover in Afghanistan subsequent to US draw down. They would attempt to retain a measure of control through seeking the key defence and intelligence portfolios for their affiliates. Pakistan also has a complicated matrimonial alliance with President Karzai who it perceives as pro-India and hence will work to undermine India's interests there.

## **Emerging Scenarios**

**Scenario 1- US Exits.** As per the US declared aim, US troops will draw down and suitably transfer responsibilities to the Afghan National army (ANA) in a phased manner before exiting Afghanistan in 2014.

**Scenario 2- US maintains bases.** US is presently negotiating a strategic partnership deal in which the US hopes to secure long term bases with 20,000-25,000 troops.

As the situation unfolds leading to actualisation of either scenario, the spotlight will remain on Pakistan and its proxies and the ANA. While it is clear that

Pakistan and its proxies will work towards eliminating Indian influence, how the ANA shapes up is still unclear. Most analysts write off any chance that the ANA will be up to scratch by 2014. Some point to ethnic fault lines in an institution that struggles to recruit Pashtuns in Southern Afghanistan. Others point to the army which is still a noxious mix of former militias, cobbled together after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. They fear that if the country went to the brink of civil war, the Afghan soldier's first loyalty would not be to the state.

**Scenario 3- Taliban-Karzai-Pakistan Réconciliation.** As yet how far this triumvirate will take effect is unclear. But, there are lot of behind the scene activities including by the US and the UN to put this partnership into effect.

## **Challenges Ahead**

The situation in Afghanistan remains volatile with the prime focus being on the role and withdrawal of foreign forces. The challenges before the parties concerned are: -

- How to achieve a stable, sovereign and peaceful Afghanistan?
- How to end the conflict? Will it be through a complete military victory which appears unlikely as of now, or should it be through a political process? If the latter course recommends itself, it would be necessary for the adversaries to talk to each other.
- All external interference must end if a political solution is to be arrived at. Here, the issue of Pakistani interference in the affairs of Afghanistan need to be addressed.
- While the withdrawal has started and will continue as laid down by President Obama, the likelihood of a complete US pull back is unlikely. Would the long term presence of a smaller component of US force be acceptable?
- Afghanistan has to be put on the road to economic recovery if lasting peace is to be achieved.

## **Likelihood of US Pullout from Afghanistan and its Fallout**

Timelines in the unfolding of events in Afghanistan are being dictated by the US and NATO. The biggest factor is the US presidential election due in 2013 which will largely influence the course of US policy in Afghanistan.

The US is negotiating a strategic agreement with Afghanistan in terms of troop presence and bases for a long term engagement in the region. The US is unlikely to pull out completely from Afghanistan as it has vital interests in the Central Asian region. The withdrawal of troops should hence be seen as an

operational withdrawal, with assistance continuing in the supportive role. The force level which the US is likely to retain is likely to be adequate to implement its greater Central Asian policy as also to enhance the capacity of the ANA to enable it to take on the Taliban. This support could be in terms of intelligence, communications, mobility, administration and possibly drones to target the Taliban. At the worst case, the ANA should be able to at least ward off attacks by the Taliban in non Pashtun areas. This could well lead to the de facto partition of Afghanistan on ethnic lines as proposed by Ambassador Blackwill earlier this year. While to some the capacity of the ANA as of now appears suspect, it must be appreciated that they still have two to three years more to hone their skills. Their performance is improving and they should be able to hold their own, especially with US support.

There is an intensification of a search for a political solution within the factions in Afghanistan. Earlier efforts at reintegration have not succeeded and the talk is now on reconciliation. People from the Taliban are talking to the US, but it is not clear whether they are important enough in their hierarchy or even if they are the right people in the organisation who are to be spoken to. But the fact that communication channels are open could be viewed positively.

**The Role of Pakistan.** In all the above, Pakistan's role has remained unaddressed. There has been an acute deterioration in US-Pak relations over the issue of Pakistan's duplicity in the war on terror, especially in the support given by Pakistan's agencies to Afghan groups. The ability of the US to work out a solution with Pakistan is very complex. The use of drones against the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan is hence likely to continue.

**Regional Solution.** No evidence exists of any regional solution either being proposed or one that is in the offing in Afghanistan. The concept itself appears flawed. While President Obama spoke of a regional solution in his first Af-Pak speech, nothing has been said or done thereafter to indicate that such a course is being considered. Besides the nations bordering Afghanistan, the major players who could be involved in a regional solution are India, Russia and China. But such an idea appears to be misconceived as without the involvement of US and NATO, the fate of Afghanistan cannot be decided. In that event the solution becomes an international one and loses its regional character. Countries like the US, India, Russia and China would eventually need to get involved in finding solutions though it would be difficult to find a common ground for conflict resolution in Afghanistan.

## **A Role for India?**

India has to remain relevant in Afghanistan. The nation has invested a great deal towards this relationship and has created tremendous goodwill amongst the local population. But this could evaporate rather rapidly in a tribal land. India should keep in mind that goodwill here can be an illusion and must not be mistaken for a permanent understanding even though the general public view of India in Afghanistan is very positive.

Another concern is the creeping Islamic radicalisation in the neighbourhood. It is vital to India's national security interests that Afghanistan is stabilised in a manner that it does not become a laboratory for radical Islam.

Unfolding of scenario one will be potentially adverse for India's economic (largely reconstruction, mineral exploration and infrastructural assets) interests in Afghanistan in the event that a US exit leaves the ANA in disarray. Scenario two will mean that India will have a reasonable chance to preserve its soft power assets in Afghanistan. But both scenarios will still unleash a resurgent and coalesced terrorist front be it the ISI-Haqqani-LeT front which has already executed two attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul (2008 & 2010) or the Ilyas Kashmiri Neo-Taliban network aimed at targeting US-Pakistan and India, post the US withdrawal. A US exit or drawdown will once again be a shot in the arm for ISI-terrorist front having claimed and consumed one superpower (USSR) and now a second one. We know that Ilyas Kashmiri has claimed the Pune German Bakery bombing and his prowess has included attacks across Europe and US including failed ones. In the event that scenario three unfolds, Pakistan is unlikely to deliver a reconciled Taliban to Karzai without a reciprocal agreement to keep India out of the Afghan equation. Hence this scenario also poses many problems for India. Without an effective ANA, Indian interests in Afghanistan will be rolled back.

The biggest hurdle to an Indian role in Afghanistan is the perception that such a role may well further complicate the situation in Afghanistan, given Pakistan's sensibilities on the issue. Options available to India are as under:

- Find a way to keep American involved in the Af-Pak region. Presently, the military and political calendar in US is at variance. US policy at the moment is evolving and it is imperative for India to keep a close watch on the situation.
- The option of 'masterly inactivity' can also be exercised to see how the situation unfolds and then take action accordingly.
- Extend firm military support to current regime in Afghanistan. This could take the form of training the ANA. In a larger role, it could involve deploying one to two divisions' worth of troops in the non Pashtun areas, while continuing

with the current economic support to the country. The lack of a direct land route from India to Afghanistan is likely to restrict this option as insertion, protection and maintenance of a large force would be a great challenge.

- India can also exercise the option of raising the temperature along the Radcliffe Line along Kashmir and create complications for Pakistan. This could be used as a bargaining chip to get noticed and be a player in any future scenario in Afghanistan.
- Enhance collaboration with US in Afghanistan. India could exploit the fact that objective of US and Pakistan in Afghanistan are fundamentally different while those of India and the US converge. US-Pak differences have deepened in recent past and these could be exploited through increased collaboration with US.
- Use the regional approach option by raising the ante in diplomatic front. India could work out a theoretical solution and propagate the same through diplomatic and other means.
- India can also explore the option of negotiating with and improving relationship with Pakistan on many levels including economic cooperation. However, this course of action would be strongly opposed by Pakistan army.
- The possibility of engaging China could be explored. Pakistan and China are ultimately likely to differ on Islamic issues and China could be favourably engaged.
- India can also play the Pashtun card by reaching out to the Pashtuns who are actually fighting in Afghanistan. India could look into aspects of empowering the Pashtuns in some form as they are likely to decide the future of Afghanistan in times to come.
- India could also consider being part of a consortium in assisting Afghanistan financially to enable the country to maintain the ANA. For three years after 1989 when the Russians left, the ANA did a good job in containing the Mujahidin, an insurgency far stronger than today's Taliban. The Army collapsed only after Moscow stopped paying its bills. The ANA & ANP will require \$ 6 billion to \$ 8 billion a year after US troops leave. With Afghanistan's GDP at \$ 16 billion (including US aid) the army's survival will devolve on the US. The US, with its own financial woes, may not pitch in to the desired extent. India, with other countries could make up the required shortfall. This could give India long term strategic advantages in a region which is increasingly becoming vital to its security interests.

It is neither necessary nor practicable to exercise all of the above options. Indeed, some of the options may be difficult if not impossible to execute such as the one relating to the deployment of military troops in Afghanistan, primarily due to the problem of logistics. However, all options must be kept open, even if only a few are the ones which can be realistically executed at this stage.

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**Rohit Singh** is an Associate Fellow at CLAWS.